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**LASTING TRUTH AMIDST FLEETING CIRCUMSTANCE:  
AN ESSAY ON AN EXEMPLARY HISTORY OF AN  
EAST TEXAS TOWN\***

*by Ralph C. Wood*

A hard-bitten reader of modern literature does not expect to like a hometown history. The genre is often the occasion for puffery and fluffery. These surveys of the local scene count the successes of illustrious families, they sing the glories of athletic heroes, and they praise the good deeds of all and sundry. But usually they contain not a word about failures and disasters or shames and crimes. Fred McKenzie's history of Avinger, an East Texas town numbering 671 souls, is no such study in self-congratulation. It reads like a William Faulkner novel or a Mark Twain story more than a conventional local history. Thus does this book deserve a much wider readership than such works ordinarily receive.

William Wordsworth is renowned for having sought to make poetry out of "incidents and situations from common life," even "low and rustic life." "In that condition," he wrote in his "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads," "the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are under less restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language." Fred McKenzie has discovered Wordsworth's truth with admirable clarity. The reader need know nothing about tiny Avinger and its people to find this a riveting book. Though rich with the particulars of a small lumber and cotton town that reached its zenith in the 1950s, McKenzie's work transcends local interest. In the lives of ordinary and otherwise forgotten people, he has revealed what Wordsworth called "the elementary feelings" — the greed and lust, the courage and charity, the grief and anger and joy that motivate human life.

In the early chapters the reader discovers McKenzie's ability to locate lasting truth amidst fleeting circumstance. He traces the city's founding father, Hamilton J. Avinger, to his South Carolina birth in 1833, to his graduation from Philadelphia's Jefferson Medical College in 1853, finally to his arrival in Cass County via ship to New Orleans and then by riverboat to Shreveport and Jefferson in 1855. Avinger was a canny entrepreneur no less than a dedicated doctor. He bought a large tract of land, and founded both apothecary and blacksmith shops only a mile away from the established village of Hickory Hill. When in the 1870s a railroad was proposed for the area, the enterprising physician "donated" a depot in exchange for having the station named after him and located near his own commercial ventures. This shrewd maneuver dried up rival businesses in

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\**Avinger, Texas USA, Vol. 1.* By Fred McKenzie. Privately printed, 1988. 316 + viii pp., \$25.00. Available prepaid from the author, Route 1, Box 404, Avinger, TX 75630.

by-passed Hickory Hill, causing the new town of Avinger to develop around property owned by the doctor.

Such realism about the town's slightly shady origins is indicative of McKenzie's work as a whole. This is an honest book, and it is full of homespun Mark Twain-style wit as well as careful historical research. Baptists who look askance at Methodist baptism are made to call it "dandruff moistening." The cotton shed that served as an open tabernacle for the local churches' "protracted meetings" — summer revivals indefinitely drawn out until the Spirit's promptings were quenched and sinners no longer converted — had an extra high center portion. McKenzie declares dead-pan that it "enabled the hot air, including that from the pulpit, to escape through the separation between the two roofs."

Among the finest sections of the book are McKenzie's remembrances of his school days in the 1920s and 1930s. Though his recollections are at once fond and funny, he reveals what we have lost in the moral and academic seriousness that once characterized small-town education. The ten grades were crowded into four rooms divided by thin partitions. A closet served as the library. The day began with worship, and even the slightest violation of school discipline earned fierce retribution.

Anyone yearning for a return to an idealized educational past need only to read McKenzie's description of what, with the aid of a hickory cane, a teacher ominously named X Carson did to John Golden, a boy who had killed a chicken accidentally:

Loud-sounding blows landed on the terrified boy's face, which he tried to shield, as best he could, with his thin-sleeved arms; others struck his chest, shoulders, back, and legs, clear down to his ankles, as he spun and hopped in a futile attempt to ward them off. John's screams and pleas for mercy didn't slow the infuriated teacher down at all, but seemed instead to throw him in more of a frenzy than ever. (p. 122)

McKenzie's description makes one wonder what personal and sexual frustration could have fired such sadistic fury, what permanent effect this bloody beating may have had on poor John Golden, and whether the boy would have received so cruel a caning had he been, say, a banker's son rather than a sharecropper's child.

It is to the author's considerable credit that he recalls not only his own rollicking schoolboy pranks but also these moments of horror. Therein lies McKenzie's faithfulness as historian of this "little postage-stamp of native soil," as William Faulkner called his own mythical Yoknapatawpha County. Yet for all his candid naming of the chiselers and deadbeats, the do-gooders and the self-serving, McKenzie's tone is affirmative and encouraging. Not in this book is there any sneering disdain for small town life. Fred McKenzie is not to Avinger as Sinclair Lewis is to Sauk Centre. As a native Michigander who migrated here as a small child with his family, McKenzie is thankful to have had Avinger as his home. Its story is to a large extent his own story. He can tell the truth about his town because

he is an insider who is yet an outsider, a long-time citizen who is beholden neither to the commercial nor the familial powers-that-be.

McKenzie does more than chronicle the obvious; he also ferrets out the hidden. The most startling revelation concerns the murder of the town's founder in 1881. The official story is that Dr. Avinger died three days after being literally disembowelled by Ross Hicks, a Negro employee who had begun the fracas by sassing his boss. McKenzie found it strange that this black man would have been so surly toward his white patron, stranger still that he was not immediately lynched upon arrest, and strangest of all that Hicks was given an orderly trial and sentenced to only twenty years in the Huntsville prison.

While doing research on the town's history in 1954, McKenzie discovered considerable skepticism, among old timers, about the standard account of Dr. Avinger's murder. With a detective's scent for the odor of truth, he tracked down John Rhyne, an eighty-five year old man who clearly remembered the sensational escapade. Rhyne and many of his contemporaries believed that the dying Dr. Avinger had falsely accused Hicks in order to shield his true assailant, a man whose name McKenzie declines to release — perhaps to protect innocent descendants of the guilty. Yet for the first time in more than a century, the hidden truth has been revealed: Ross Hicks was probably a black stooge made to bear a white man's guilt.

One need not be a political liberal to find McKenzie's treatment of race relations the most interesting and revealing parts of his work. Though hardly a righteous crusader, McKenzie knows what unfairness and injustice are, and he is willing to call them by name. It is indeed the confessional character of McKenzie's moral judgments that make them so convincing. Regarding the separate-but-equal doctrine, for example, he recalls his own years as a school trustee during the late 1940s and mid-1950s:

Anytime any funding came into the white board's hand, ... from whatever source, at least 90% of it was spent on the white school facilities and only what happened to be left over trickled down to the blacks. This was typified by an expression I heard over and over until it got to be somewhat of a joke with us. It usually came about this way — we'd get a sum of money to spend on improving school property. After spending it as just indicated, some board member would say, "Well now, you know we ought to spend some of this on the coloreds" (only he usually used another word). Then the others would chime in and say, "That's right, we'll buy 'em some paint and let 'em paint their building, that should take care of them for a while." I used to think that old 1921 building must have paint an inch thick on it by this time. Maybe that's why it has lasted so long. (p.146)

The book's most engrossing episode concerns Avinger's leading turn-of-the-century citizen, Bragg Duncan (1860-1931). As a courageous historian not bound by a fastidious propriety, McKenzie voices openly what had often been whispered about this man whose brazen lust and

generous philanthropy make him worthy of comparison to Faulkner's Carothers McCaslin. In his respectable role, we learn, Duncan was a wealthy railroad investor, banker, churchman, and husband; but in his shadow life he was the father of seven children by his housekeeper and paramour. She was Jennie Turner, an attractive Negress whose parents had been brought from Georgia as slaves of the Duncans.

Rather than concealing this liaison, Duncan publically acknowledged and supported his mulatto offspring. He kept them near at hand and let them call him "Papa Bragg," he built them houses and a school, and he made modest provision for them in his will. In an act of extraordinary homage which an official image-saving chronicler would have declined, McKenzie follows the careers of all the miscegenated Duncan progeny. He locates and photographs the last of them, with her notably Caucasian features, living in a St. Louis apartment. He also recounts the gripping story of what happened to Duncan's huge estate, including the gigantic court suit brought by 184 white descendants two decades after the old man died. Almost like a Greek tragedy, the saga ends with the suicide of Duncan's executor and business partner, R.M. Kasling.

It is not only the scandalous side of Avinger's history that interests McKenzie. He also renders honor to unsensational folk of both races, showing what is memorable in their otherwise forgotten lives. There is "Crazy Hattie," for example, an epileptic black woman whose husband hacked off her hand in a fit of rage. After his arrest, Hattie confessed, she never saw hand or husband again. We also meet "Nigger" John Clark, a boy who spent his summers playing with McKenzie and other white children instead of his fellow blacks. Even after they had taken up books, Clark would sneak to the edge of the white schoolyard and peer in, wistfully yearning to rejoin his now segregated friends.

One of Avinger's most remarkable citizens was Doss Jones, the town's last remnant of slavery. We hear Jones recalling his days as a slave on an Alabama plantation and explaining what Emancipation meant for a sixteen-year old boy. We also see McKenzie's photograph of Jones taken in 1954, shortly before his death at age 108. Those attending the dying ex-slave had enabled him to retain an immaculate dignity, as McKenzie notes: "his coal black face [was] nestled among the whitest of white pillows."

"Pap" Jones is one of thirteen children belonging to Doss' wife Mary, although his own biological father was a white man. "Pap" is remarkable for having broken the deadly cycle of sharecropper poverty by getting a job at a sawmill, earning a regular income, and finally returning to school in order to earn his diploma at the age of sixty-five.

McKenzie also etches keen vignettes of Avinger's white residents. Among the town's most memorable "characters" was a frugal and hard-working blacksmith named Goldie Henderson who, only days before his

death, asked for a crowbar. Using the last of his sapped strength, he pried a board off his bedroom wall, and out poured a cache of some \$16,000. We also encounter Sadie Stuckey, a self-appointed Yankee missionary who passed out tracts, sold Bibles, and went about doing good in her circa 1922 Ford coupe. This large lady drove her car from almost the center of the seat, pushing her diminutive husband George against the passenger side and leaving her fox terrier Turkey squarely behind the wheel.

Far from the least conventional of Avinger's citizens were Naomi and B.J. Douglas. "Nig" was a pretty mail-order bride who smoked cigarettes in a long Mae West holder and dressed up in Hollywood finery to frequent the local picture show rather than the churches. Her husband "Jay" became so deaf that he could hear only with the aid of an air trumpet, leading the irreverent to make ribald jokes about the couple's relations in bed and elsewhere. Unaware that Jay's new hearing aids had arrived in the morning post, Nig received a terrible thrashing when she idly asked: "What did we get in the mail today, you deaf old S.O.B.?"

McKenzie narrates not only the humor of local life but also its quiet courage and poignant calamity. He tells how Wirt Simmons, a black serviceman recently returned from the World War II, was brained with a baseball bat during a racial dispute. Mrs. Jack Dorman, a prominent lady of the town who happened upon the furor, single-handedly dragged the unconscious Simmons into her car and sped him to a doctor. There was nothing falsely heroic in her deed, as McKenzie observes. It was simply a matter of woman seeing a man in extremity and answering his need without fuss.

During the 1920s Henry Whitworth was at once postmaster, sawmill operator, hard drinker, and village atheist. During his latter years he was sentenced to a federal penitentiary for certain "financial irregularities" at the post office — although many say the crimes were committed by other family members whose shabby practices Whitworth failed to monitor. Whitworth's wife sued for divorce after her husband left for prison, but then remarried him upon his return. The couple later celebrated their golden wedding anniversary as if there had been no hiatus!

The ageing Whitworth did not slacken the reins of his unbelief. When his son was killed in an automobile accident, the old man refused to attend the funeral, declining the church's assurances during the worst of times no less than the best. Yet Whitworth's unconventional atheism was permeated with a humility that conventional piety often misses:

"I had a good job as postmaster, a devoted wife and a good family, but with all that, I still wasn't happy. It wasn't until I had lost everything, including my reputation, that I attained real happiness and contentment. Back in my so-called better days, I was burdened down with worry, indecision, envy, resentment, and many other negative traits which led to my becoming a soured-on-the-world alcoholic, but once I hit rock bottom, all that changed and the years

that have transpired since have been some of the happiest of my life.”  
(p. 64)

Thus was a magnanimous historian like McKenzie able to elicit a religious confession that would have been closed off to a moralizing minister.

John Avinger, the only descendant of the founder to remain in the town, came to a less happy end. Though a man of considerable means, he refused all modern conveniences except the automobile, saved mountains of bread wrappers and newspapers in his cluttered house, squandered his savings on bad loans to conscienceless borrowers, and died in an insane asylum. Yet McKenzie memorializes this sad eccentric as more than a mere failure. We are reminded that Avinger was an expert marksman who was also gifted in math and penmanship. Hence McKenzie's final salute: “He is remembered, by those who knew him well, as a friendly, good-natured, easy-going type of man who probably never intentionally harmed anyone.”

It is such remarkable remembrances of the near and distant past that make this book relevant to a much wider audience than Avinger and Cass County. Fred McKenzie has raised a verbal and pictorial monument to people whose names and lives would have been erased by history. In saving them from the oblivion of the past, he has also made them stand like guideposts and sentinels for the present. To read *Avinger, Texas USA* is thus to receive moral instruction of the best kind — the kind that does not hector and whine, but rather humbles and inspires.

McKenzie's book is also commendable for displaying the skills other local historians must possess if they are to make their own town stories more than a lifeless chronicle. His painstaking compilation and assimilation of data, his colorful and vigorous prose, his splendid choice of photographs, and above all his telling portraits of the poor and the powerless alongside the wealthy and the mighty — these are exemplary indeed. McKenzie's work has enduring worth because it reveals how, amidst the chances and changes of time, we work out our sin as well as our salvation.

It must be admitted that *Avinger, Texas USA* contains numerous mistakes in spelling and punctuation, and that the book's organization is sometimes clumsy. Yet these innocent blemishes give the work an unvarnished charm. The most egregious errors are to be corrected in a second edition, and a sequel devoted to the town's families is forthcoming. But already in its rough and warty shape, this excellent book serves to recover an East Texas past that would otherwise be irretrievably lost. As an outsider who reluctantly agreed to read Fred McKenzie's book only because it was a family gift, I found myself devouring it with consuming interest. Others — many others — should go and do likewise.